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SUBJECT: Embassy Brussels iftaar Evening: A Multicultural Success

¶1. Ambassador and Mrs. Sam Fox hosted fifty persons at an Iftaar on September 25, 2007. The focus this year was on younger guests and sharing experiences as members of diverse societies. Members of Belgium's Moroccan and Turkish communities present included young politicians, journalists, student and community leaders. The mood was warm (even heated at one table of politicos), with guests pleasantly surprised" at their new appreciation of Americans as friendly and open people. The presence of USG exchange alumni who shared their experiences in the U.S. reinforced the credibility of America's positive story. From all accounts, the evening was a great success.

¶2. In remarks after the breaking of the fast and prayers, the Ambassador underscored the importance of diversity in founding and building a strong United States. He cited his own history as a first-generation American whose mother had left Europe from the Belgian port of Antwerp. He suggested that guests exchange their families' experiences adjusting to life in a different culture.

¶3. Tables were arranged by language: Dutch, English and French, facilitating post's objective to encourage contact between Belgium's distinct Turkish and Moroccan communities.

¶4. Conversation at all tables was convivial and open. A former participant in PD's "Karamah" Muslim women's leadership program and Ph.D. economist candidate said she had not realized how harassed she felt as a hijab-wearing Muslim in Antwerp before she visited Washington, where the lack of comment occasioned by her head covering was astonishing. She returned with a very positive image of the U.S. and the desire to continue her studies or to teach there.

¶5. At a francophone table, advanced-degree students shared their experiences as after-school teachers of math or language to younger persons in their communities. One said the challenge of this experience was drawing him to politics as a career. One of the Moroccan musicians commented at the end that he had previously had a totally different view of Americans; he didn't expect "you to be interested in us, to be so open to our culture, to be so friendly."

¶6. At a table of Antwerp guests, conversation focused on the discrimination to which Muslim businesses were subjected by Belgian health and other authorities. The state agency whose mission is to enforce anti-discriminatory acts was also criticized as "toothless." The openness of the discussion on such topics reflects the comfortable atmosphere of the evening. At another table, current controversies concerning the Belgium Muslim executive body that manages state subsidies were hotly debated by Turkish and Moroccan-born guests.

¶7. Having USG exchange alumni mingling with new guests proved a good way to reinforce the positive U.S. image. At a Dutch-speaking table, a "Karamah" alumna also shared her positive U.S. experience, commenting that "utochtonal" (i.e., native-born Belgians have much to learn from the United States in dealing with cultural and religious diversity. She shared her surprise at the diversity of Muslims in American mosques - South Asians, blacks, North African and sub-Saharan as well, adding that the U.S. Muslim community's

diversity mirrored the broader society.

¶18. Comment: While a risk, post's efforts to reach "broader, deeper, younger" to persons previously unknown to the mission worked well, in part due to the informal atmosphere. Post looks forward to programs by which to send more Belgians to the U.S. and/or to provide insights into how diversity is managed and accepted in the United States. As a first step, one of our 2008 IV candidates, a senior civil servant whose duties include integrating immigrants, intends to focus on this subject. End comment.

FOX